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American Waterfowler

Volume XVI, Issue V

Late Season Lessons

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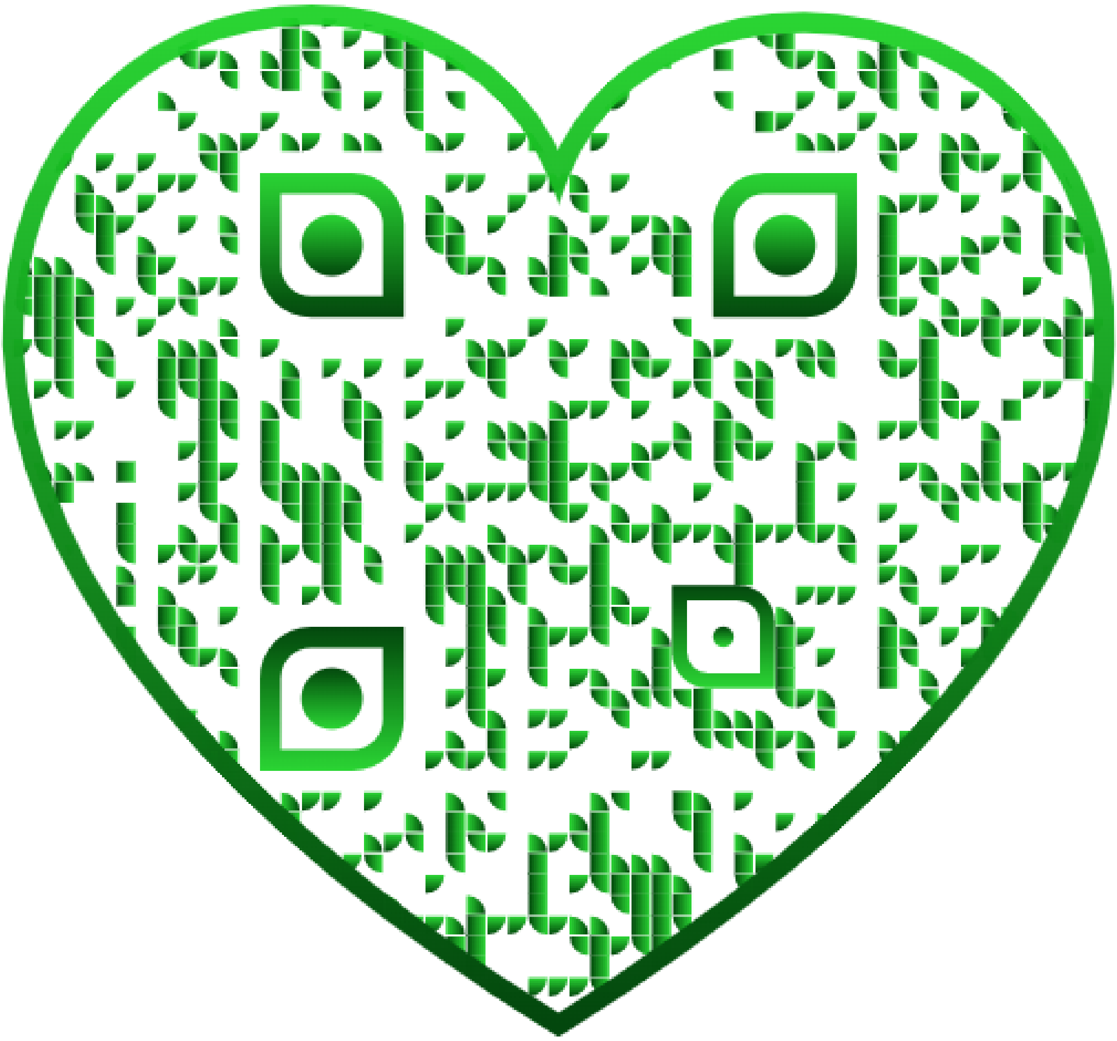

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NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2025

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FROM THE EDITOR

Jay Strangis

Respecting Water

Being a native Minnesotan (the "O" is long if you want to make fun of the way we talk) our hunting crew has spent many a day on the water, and not always in the best of conditions. It's not that we seek bad weather, but it certainly can be part of the waterfowling game from time to time.

We're boat people. You tend to be when you have plenty of lakes, rivers and some of the biggest inland lakes in the country. I got my first boat about the time I got my first driver's license. I know more about outboards and trailers than I ever care to, all part of forced initiation.

And I know about water safety, again, mostly by experience. But I've been lucky. My experiences were small potatoes, compared to some of the situations that "could have been".

I used to make runs into Canada to shoot bluebills on Lake of the Woods. That meant getting completely outfitted at my U.S. digs in Baudette, Minnesota, trailering my 14-foot boat through customs at dark-thirty and driving 30 miles to a landing on the giant lake.

Putting in just before first light I would motor northwest by compass at full speed to get across a wide stretch of open water. Soon I could make out land features, small islands in the dim early light. Knowing by experience the depths and paths through and around islands I could make my way to rice beds in protected bays. Fast limits of fat bluebills were common—just ask my dog.

That kind of thing seems crazy today. What if a big wind had blown up while I was out there. Or what if my motor had died miles from a protected shoreline. I had no backup plan. No satellite phone. No flares.

In my time as an editor, I've heard some sobering and sad stories of waterfowlers who have succumbed to unexpected tragedy involving boats. God bless them all.

We don't want more tragedies. So, if I may, I'd like to make a few suggestions based on quite a few years of experience (No.1. Life jacket. Wear it !!!)

Let me suggest, no downwind runs in high winds. Wherever you are going, it's going to get worse the farther you go, and in the dark, it may be too late to turn safely. You cannot "read" the water in the dark!

Stay close to shorelines as much as possible. In cold water you MUST get to shore as soon as possible. Hypothermia works fast.

Keep decoys in bags in boats. If you capsize, a bag of decoys will float you, one or two loose decoys will not.

Avoid big rivers with strong current in strong winds—double whammy. There's always tomorrow.

An empty boat in high wind is a one-man death trap. Most hunt with the wind at our back. You run downwind to get a "long" cripple but as soon as you have the duck you turn back into the wind and gun it. With no bow weight the boat stands up and flips backwards.

Carry a flare gun. They're cheap. In an emergency it might bring help in time. Here's hoping you never need it.

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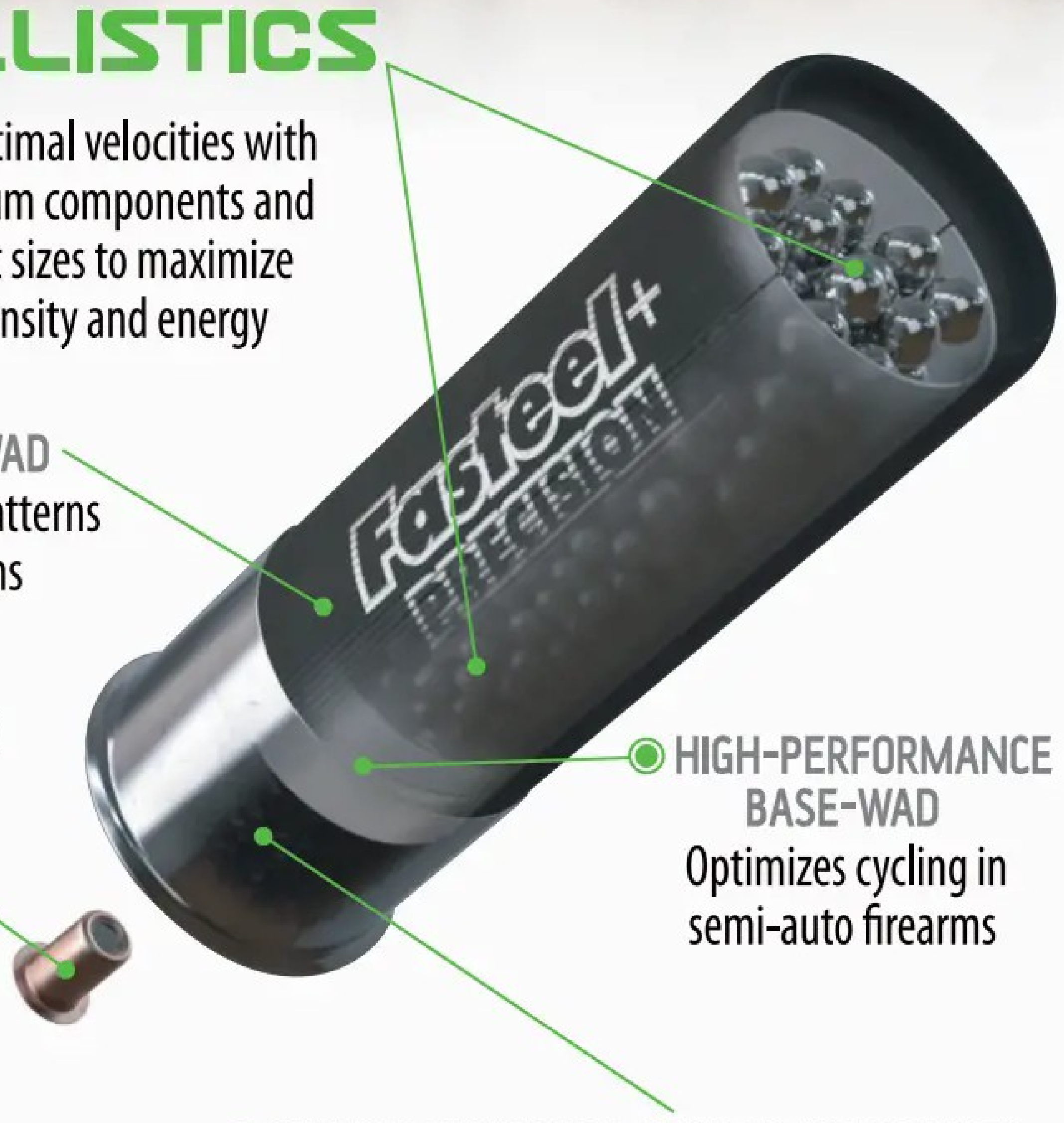
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"Any glimpse into the life of an animal quickens our own and makes it so much the larger and better in every way."
—John Muir

PHOTO JAY STRANGIS

{ Flyway Watch }

By Greg Hoch

The Survivor's Club

Toward the end of the summer, the government releases the waterfowl spring population report. This year the estimate was 33,980,400 ducks. As recently as 2014, the surveys estimated 49,521,700 ducks. While this year's number is well below other years, it's still quite a few ducks. Again, these are spring numbers. To get the fall number, subtract any ducks that might have died over the summer, but add the ducks that hatched this year and survived to join the flight southward.

When considering the biology of ducks, or most species of wildlife for that matter, it's amazing there are any ducks left. The actuarial numbers tables for most wildlife species are pretty grim.

The life of a duck is, well, hard. We can start the story somewhere in the south. In the spring ducks head north. They are essentially running a series of almost daily marathons, or maybe multiple marathons on some days. Along the way they must find enough food to fuel their engines to make it the next leg of the journey.

For a hen, that's just the beginning of the adventure. Once she arrives at the breeding grounds, she must start thinking about making a nest and laying eggs. Eggs contain a lot of calcium, protein, and fats. In some cases, the hen arrives on the breeding grounds with some or most of these nutrients. In other cases, she must get almost all of them in her diet once she arrives. The hen must eat thousands of insects. One study found a wood duck hen needed to eat roughly 60,000 insects to get enough nutrients to lay a clutch of eggs.

Now that the hen has laid her eggs and is incubating, she is literally a sitting duck. A thunderstorm could flood, chill and kill the eggs. A hailstorm could kill the hen and crush the eggs. She also has to hope there are no wildfires or hay mowers during this time period. Then there is the array of nest predators she must avoid, both furred and feathered. There have been numerous studies of nest success in ducks. Some of those studies find that less than 10 percent of nests survive to produce at least one duckling.

Once the eggs hatch, the ducklings must walk from the nest to a wetland nearby. Some of those journeys

The Survivor's Club

Drake Gadwall. Photo Kip Earny

are over a mile long. No one knows how many don't make that long trek on toothpick legs with big floppy feet.

After the ducklings reach the wetland, life doesn't get much better. They must stay warm, avoid bad weather, hope they don't catch any diseases or pick up too many parasites. They must run a gauntlet of furred, finned, and feathered predators. They have to hope the wetland doesn't dry up too fast.

During these critical first weeks, ducklings are eating machines, gobbling up thousands of protein-rich insects every day. At one day old, a mallard weighs about one ounce. At one week the ducklings weigh 2.3 ounces. At weeks two, three, and six, the ducklings weigh 5.2, 10.2, and 24.1 ounces. Ducklings hatch in late spring to early summer. By late summer to early fall, the duck weigh 2.3 to 2.6 pounds. That means a duckling multiplies their weight by a factor of 42 in the first two or three months of life. At the same growth rate, a seven-and-a-half-pound baby would weigh 312 pounds at their six-month check-up. That's a heck of a lot of growth in the first weeks.

Surely life as an adult must get easier, but it really doesn't. In his Ducks, Geese, and Swans of North America, Frank Bellrose summarizes numerous studies to come up with "actuarial tables" for most duck species. Gadwalls are a good example. Gadwall hens lay an average clutch of ten eggs. The average size of broods less than two weeks old was seven ducklings. There was an average of six ducklings in brood that were three- to seven-weeks old.

Overall, only 33 percent of gadwalls survived as yearlings. Only 48 percent of adult gadwalls survived from one year to the next. A study of pintails found similar results. The study started with 288 pintails. In the following years those numbers dropped to 88, 52, and 33 survivors. Only two of the original 288 survived to ten years. Put another way, about half the pintails die each year.

While we can often point to the cause of the death of a single individual, such as a round of No. 4 steel shot, it's much harder to explain changes in population numbers.

Here's one scenario. A brood of ducklings reaches a wetland. The wetland is full of sediment with little insect or plant growth. As such, they can't find much to eat and grow slowly. They are more susceptible to parasites and disease, which weaken them even more. The region is hit by early summer drought and the ducklings are crowded into a smaller and smaller area in the center of the wetland. Over a few days, a combination of minks and hawks kill each duckling. What ultimately led to their death? Was it poor habitat with little food, disease, drought, or predator?

One of the goals, if not the primary goal, of wildlife managers is to bump up the survival numbers wherever possible. Many young and adults will die every season of every year. How, and where, can they be helped to survive? There will never be enough help to reduce any of these death factors to zero, but there are things that can help them to survive another season.

This is where habitat comes into play and why it's so important for ducks and all wildlife populations. There must be good stopover sites all along the migration routes, whether going north or south, that are full of the right kind of foods. There must be abundant grasslands and other nesting habitats up north so there are many places for ducks to hide their nests. There needs to be a large number of wetlands and those wetlands need to be packed full of nutritious insects and plants for the ducks and ducklings to feed on.

Droughts or drainage will reduce the number, or quantity, of wetlands. Sedimentation, pollutants and invasive species will reduce the quality of those wetlands. Excellent habitat for predators within or adjacent to brood rearing habitat reduces the survival rate of the next generation.

Finally, as we look at flights of ducks, as weak or as strong as they may be, we might remember that every duck we see at any time of year is a survivor.

{ In Pursuit }

The Crown And The King

By Bucky D'Agostino

The night before the hunt I was munching on a snack and the bite felt like chomping on a No. 2 steel pellet. The unpleasant surprise took a chunk off the tooth. A trip to my local dentist was definitely in order

The appointment was for 9 a.m., which made an early morning hunt out of the question. After learning I needed a crown, I knew I wouldn't be on the water till lunchtime. However, I glanced at the tide schedule and saw that the only ramp not iced-in had a 1:29 p.m. high tide. This was incredible news.

The thermometer read 18 degrees at noon and I was reasonably sure one particular ramp with great tide movement in front of it would have open water. I texted my wife, saying that I'd be headed out to give it a try, since this could be my last hunt. Single digit temps were predicted in the days ahead.

During a coffee stop. I ran into an old-timer who asked if I had found open water in the morning. I let him know I was just headed out and where I was going. He had passed the ramp a few hours earlier and said it was wide open.

I arrived to see two trucks with trailers already parked. I was pleased to see here would be little pressure. Also, numerous black ducks, the kings of the bay, were moving about searching for respite. My heart was racing as I readied my rig.

I made sure to put my truck in four-wheel just in case the iced mud and crushed shells were an issue. Fortunately, all went well. After zipping my life vest I motored off to a destination yet to be determined.

As I rounded the first bend a pair of black ducks departed their little eddy on the back side of the point. They were the first of many I would disturb as I beelined toward a small cut a quarter mile down the pass.

After tucking-in, I tossed out a few decoys. Black ducks aren't the most social of birds and a few dekes often suffice. The lines immediately became taut and the decoys started a bit of side-to-side action in the last of the incoming tide. Getting loaded and comfortable was all that remained.

Though the temperature was frigid, the lack of wind made for a comfortable sit. Brant were out of season. but visible in all directions. A trio came down the pass from the big water and with cupped wings took a seat just past me.

Within minutes more black ducks were filtering back. It was apparent that the only open water was within sight, and it harbored hoards of black ducks. These birds aren't kings of the bay for their dashing looks alone. They possess a PhD in wariness which makes them the most noble of ducks to hunt. I was getting looks, but many were just out of range. I began to feel anxious. Was there something they were seeing?

In the meantime a few buffies were perusing past and though they were tempting my heart was set on a noble black duck or two. I did wonder why they came buzzing by, so I took a peak behind me. Great numbers of birds were taking flight and it was easy to see why. The tide had switched and began moving in the opposite direction. The ice flow was returning and had nudged them all from their naps. This was good news for me!

A lone black duck had his mind set on my little eddy and was gliding in with cupped wings. It banked hard and my first shot anchored it well. I was elated! After a season filled with diver ducks, I finally took the most noble of birds. I watched it floating and slowly retreating with the tide, hoping to have an opportunity at one more. However, it would be my only bird, and I couldn't have been happier. The Novocain still hadn't worn off when I was holding the most prized bird in all

The Crown And The King

of Barnegat Bay.

I view adventures and time on the water with an appreciation that is hard to describe. I sat the rest of the afternoon watching black ducks, buffleheads, bluebills, and even an eagle move around the marsh and bay. I daydreamed about summer days right here 45 years ago with my dad. We drifted this very waterway for flounder and weakfish.

As I motored back to the ramp my mind was inundated with thoughts. I wondered if this was the last of the 2024-2025 season. Ice was overtaking the landscape and most birds were well-south of here. I was a realist and knew time was of the essence. I gave a silent thanks to my dad who showed me this wonderful area over 50 years ago. He's in his 80's and though he doesn't come with me, I update him after every hunt. This one would be no different.

As I beached my boat and stepped out I didn't want the day to end. I snapped a picture of the black's gorgeous plumage. There is no question why the black duck is the king of all waterfowl. The purple on its wings was magnificent and its rich color handsome. I felt a sense of accomplishment.

The ride back was surreal. The wooden bridges I drove over were a step back in time. They brought back great memories of long-gone days—a great symbol of this storied region that has stood the test of time and has remained much like it was centuries ago.

I wasn't bothered that I never took my second black duck to fill my limit. I was overjoyed to have had the chance to get out, crown prep and all. I'd be back in ten months with the same appreciation.

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{ Still Kickin' }

Nine Lives Of The 10 Gauge

By Bill Morrissey

It's hard to believe today, but at one time the 10 gauge was the waterfowling gun of choice. Of course, that was a long time ago. During the decades of 1890 to 1910, the 10 gauge was the practical choice of sportsmen looking to shoot ducks and geese. Easier to handle than the still available 8 gauge and more effective than the 12 gauge in the delivery of large-sized shot, the 10 gauge was the arm of choice.

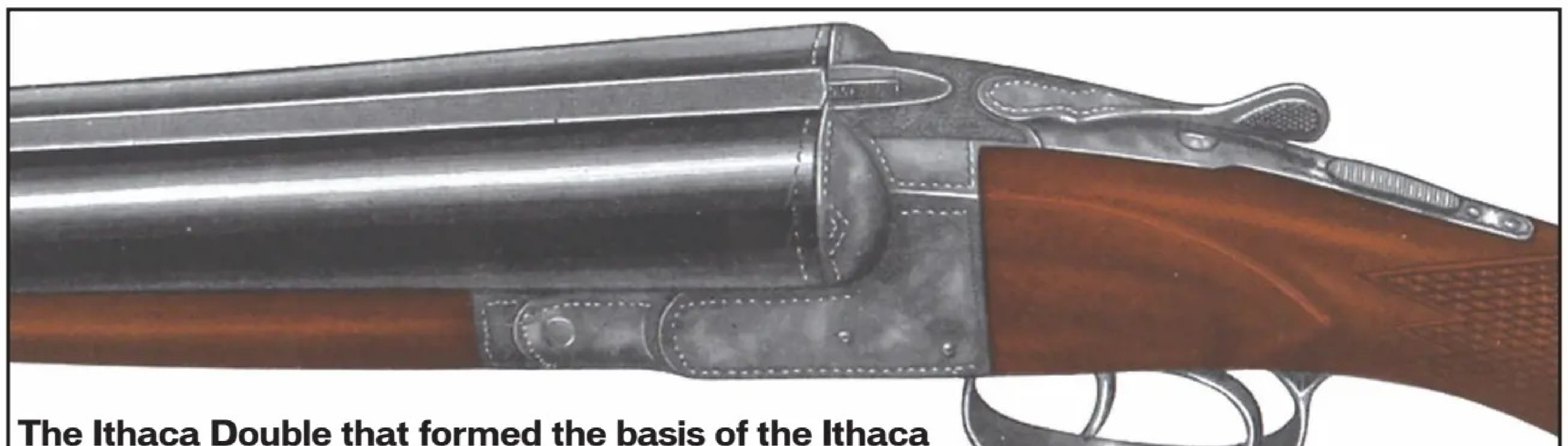
W. W. Greener, in his 1910 book "The Gun and Its Development," noted, "The most generally useful type of 10-bore is that of 8 ½ pounds to 9 ½ pounds in weight, firing either brass or paper cases and using the standard charge of 4 drams of powder and 1 ½ to 1 ¾ oz. of No. 4 or larger shot." He stated that the 10 gauge was a "versatile and popular choice" and that it shot "large-sized shot with better effect than the 12 bore gun." He noted, however, that when using smaller shot, "the smaller gun was quite its equal." He added that a 12 gauge of equal style and quality cost less than a 10.

Improvement in the technology of shotgun shells in the first quarter of the 20th century allowed the 12 gauge to cut into the popularity of the 10. Uniform 2 ¾-inch chambers for the 12 gauge, smokeless and progressive burning powders and new loads that matched standard factory loading for the 10 gauge all served to stoke the popularity of the 12 gauge.

At a time when the surging popularity of the 12 gauge appeared to be in a position to bury the 10, new life was breathed into the big shell by the creation of a "Super 10." This loading packaged 1 ⅝ ounces of shot into a 2 ⅞-inch shell. The Ithaca Gun Company proclaimed that its "Super 10" double killed at ranges of "10 to 15 yards farther than any 12 gauge because the load carries fully a dram more powder and ¼ ounce more shot than the heaviest 12 gauge." The Super 10 not only delivered more of a payload, but tests showed that it patterned well even out to 60 yards.

The prominence of the Super 10 was short lived, however, because the Western Cartridge Company had bigger plans. In 1932, the company built on the success of its Super-X line of shotgun shells and created the 3 ½-inch 10 gauge "Magnum" even though there was no factory gun chambered for the new shell at the time! Western solved this technicality by entering into an agreement with the Ithaca Gun Company to build a gun to house the new Magnum shell. Ithaca already had its Super 10 double, and it lengthened and widened the frame while also beefing up the fastening system. Fitted with heavier barrels, the gun weighed in at 10 ½ pounds and was produced as a special-order item.

In his book "Best Guns," Michael McIntosh relates that Charles Askins, one of the top gun writers of the day, owned the first Ithaca Magnum 10 and was a factor in popularizing the new gun and its 3 ½-inch shell. McIntosh quotes Askins as saying, "It is a magnificent arm.… I take the Ithaca when I really need range."



The Ithaca Double that formed the basis of the Ithaca 3 ♣-inch Magnum 10. The base gun was the "New Ithaca Double (NID)" which with a strengthened barrel lump design, a heavier frame and 32-inch barrels became the Magnum 10.

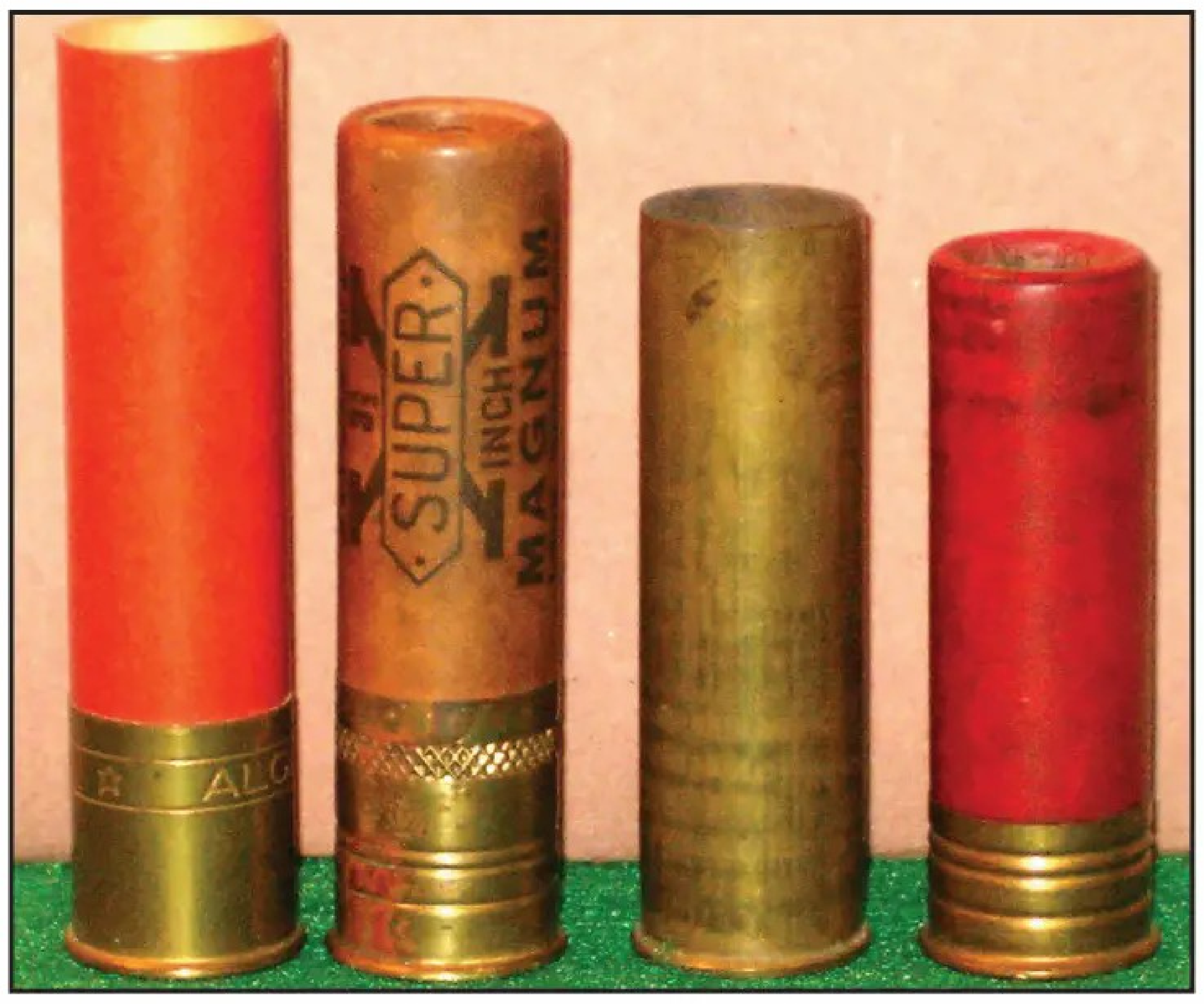
Introduced during the depths of the Depression, it is not surprising that examples of the Ithaca Magnum 10 are fairly rare and highly collectible.

Although the Magnum 10 provided an advance in long-range waterfowling, even this shell's advantage would quickly start to dissipate. Development of more effective loadings for the 12 gauge continued, and this, coupled with the public's increasing interest in the smaller gauges, eroded the market for the 10 gauge. In the 1950s, Jack O'Connor reported that the 12 gauge had virtually a 50-percent market share and that the 10 gauge's share had declined to only 2 percent. At that point, it would have been easy to predict that the 10 gauge was headed for extinction. Once again, the 10 received a reprieve.

One development responsible for generating new interest in the 10 gauge was the introduction of a new

{ Still Kickin' }

Nine Lives Of The 10 Gauge



Iterations of 10 guage loads. Second from left is the factory loaded 3 ½-inch 10 gauge Super-X Magnum from Winchester.

shotgun chambered for the 3 ½-inch shell. In competition with the imported doubles and the Marlin bolt action Goose Gun, Ithaca introduced a 10 gauge auto in 1974. Built of "stress absorbing stainless steel" and providing a "reduced recoil sensation." It weighed 11 pounds, 6 ounces and provided three fast shots, long-range potency and less recoil.

A second factor that convinced sportsmen to give the 10 gauge another look was the mandate for nontoxic shot. The lighter 12 gauge steel loadings reduced effectiveness, and once again the larger payload of the 3 ½-inch 10 gauge became of interest. The revival would again be temporary because the 1988 introduction of the 3 ½-inch 12 gauge shell quickly narrowed the performance gap.

Is the 10 gauge an artifact of history? Without a doubt, the 12 gauge is the most popular all-around gun, providing long-range capability, less bulk, more versatility and lower cost. The 10 gauge is certainly not the gun for the one-gun hunter, but there is still a cadre of individuals who shoot the big 10. With continued interest, it is likely that the sound of the 10 gauge will still echo in the marshes for at least a few more years.

URUGUAY'S SAN JOSE LODGE

An Endless Migration

The calendar says that duck season has wrapped up at home, but at Uruguay's San Jose Lodge, an endless migration lives on. From May through September, you'll see exotics like rosy-billed pochards, white-faced whistling ducks, Brazilian and ringed teal, and many other species.

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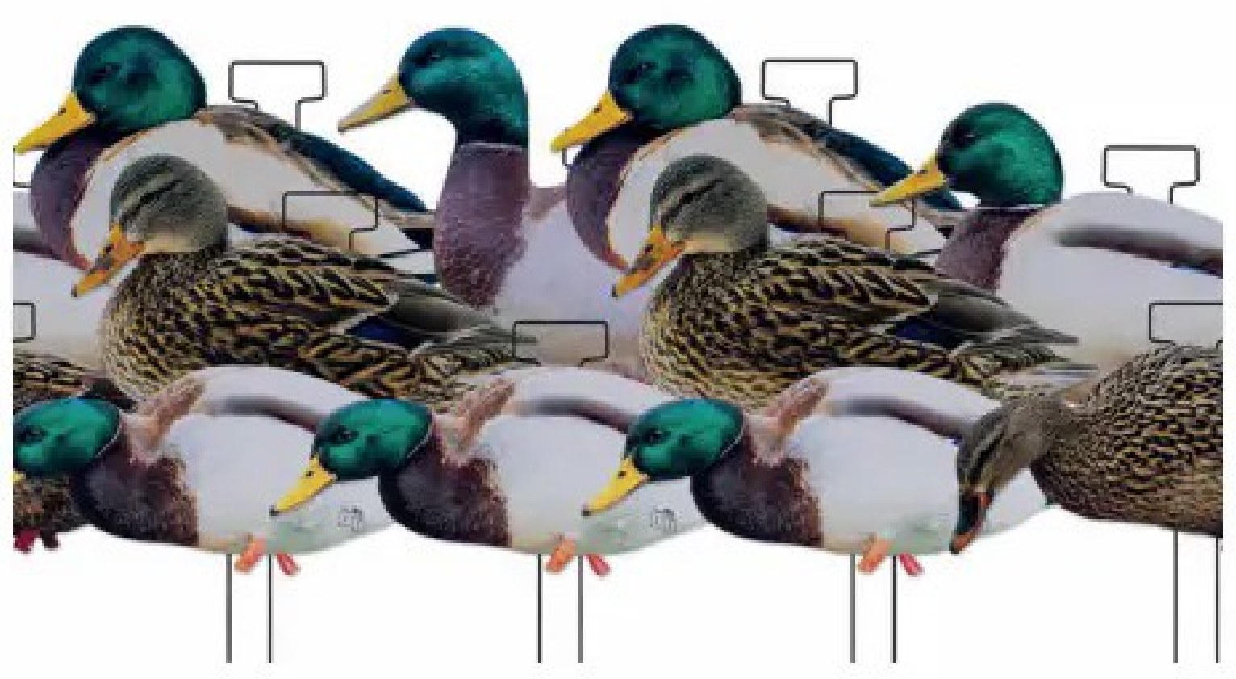

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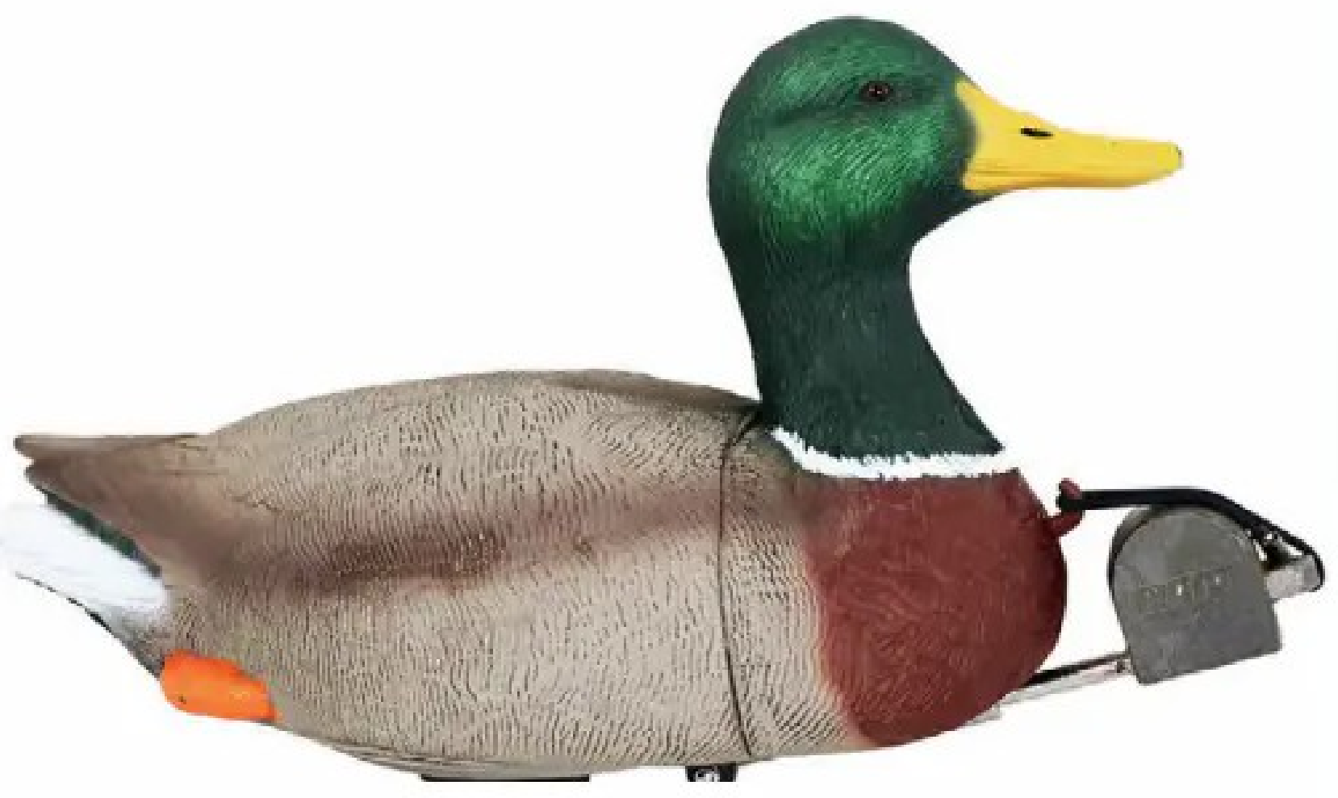

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WINDS OF CHANGE

Some Storms Demand Immediate Attention

The winds of change howled as fowlers across the state feverishly checked their phones. Three inches or eight? Wind gusts of twenty-five or forty? Regardless, the mid-week storm had set into motion an array of emails and calls to employers claiming illness of the the avian variety.

By James Davis

The previous afternoon had seen hunters on the move, glassing fields, marshes and bodies of water for any glimpse of visitors from the north. The predicted winter storm combined with the promise of powerful north winds had lured them from offices, classrooms, and job sites.

Reports from north of the border and the Dakotas had confirmed that massive flocks were staging. With hopes and prayers, the forecasted weather would turn their water hard, forcing them to catch the last train south. The skies however, remained empty.

Driving home from work. I just wasn't sure. Should I call in the next day, placing the hunt in the hands of a prediction? The season ended in two weeks. Would this be THE grand passage?

Pulling into my driveway and stepping out of my truck, a noticeable chill was in the air. The flag ripped at its pole. Trees that had been full of reds, oranges and yellows were now barren. I had my answer. Emailing work, tomorrow would be a personal day.

With the quickly diminishing weather conditions, my sights were set on a large public marsh, 35 miles to the north. The shallow backwaters and thick walls of cattails would provide the hungry migrants shelter from the storm.

It would, however, take a bit of leg work to access. Southeastern Wisconsin had been experiencing a drought and the dikes leading to the main river channel were dried up.

An Early Start

A full night's sleep wasn't happening. Anticipation combined with the wind knocking on my windows had me up well before the alarm sounded. Pilot, my youngest Chesapeake, bounced at the back door and raced around the kitchen, a stolen sock in his mouth, filling the air with excited roos. Driving north, the wind was whipping and snow began to spit. Deer, sensing the barometric drop, were leaving the cornfields and bounding across the asphalt into the cedar swamps.

My eyes narrowed and grip tightened. Turning down the gravel road to the launch, the tires squeaked and groaned cutting through the fresh snow. Dragging the skiff down the dry dike towards the main channel, Pilot welcomed the winter wonderland, playfully running ahead.

The wind, as predicted, was hard and steady from the north and the snow flew sideways accumulating at an astonishing rate. King Boreas, was surely at play as the squall intensified creating near whiteout conditions. We pushed ahead, one step and a pull on the skiffs front rope at a time, working towards the inky black ribbon of water.

Reaching the river, I slid the skiff into the the chop. Pilot took his position at the bow and we shoved off. Heading south, the gusts hammered my backside. Positioning my paddle as a rudder, we flew downstream. In the distance, I could make the point I had planned to hunt. Its black finger jutting out into the grey night sky.

Acting as a break wall, the waves slapped against the exposed side of the peninsula. Whipping around the tip of the point, I found calm. A small sliver of backwater sat like glass, unmolested from the winds battering the main channel. Ducks erupted skyward, their raucous quacks of discontent filling the air. Stepping into the shallows, I dragged the skiff up, onto the frozen mud flat. The snow continued at an alarming rate. The once quiet and peaceful marsh was transformed into an angry snow monster.

Brushing the snow from the old burlap sack, I began to remove the imposters. A mix of oversized mallards and blacks. I waded out, placing the stool. Unwinding the lines, my fingers grew stiffer by the minute. Each weight vanishing with a ker-plunk into the darkness below. The cork blocks, as if dropped from the gallows, flew to the end of their lines and abruptly hung, swinging back and forth, dancing on the waves.

Crashing through the thick cattails to our makeshift blind, the snow pelted my face and covered my coat. Seated low, Pilot and I were finally out of the wind. The storm was raging like an angry bull.

Shooting time arrived. Peering out, a group of three appeared from nowhere. The ghosts descended upon the actors. With outstretched wings and dropped webs, they backpedaled suspended just above the blocks. Pilot's ears perked. I rose. In the chaos, two muffled shots were taken. A pair lay belly up, bright orange legs kicking towards the heavens. I whispered "Pilot", the brown bomber was off like a rocket, kicking up snow, racing across the flat, and into the slushy water.

Well Seasoned Birds

The plump birds wore a thick coat of down. Large iridescent green heads, dark chestnut breasts, bright yellow bills, and long flight feathers that had carried them many miles. Feeding in the vast Canadian wheat fields, waning daylight pushed them south. Basking in the potholes of the Dakotas, they had fattened, feasting on the kernels left from the combines. Hard water had brought them to me as they rode the north winds south on their annual pilgrimage.

Pilot took his place and was back to guarding the imposters from another invasion. Quickly covered in snow, his heavy insulted coat keeping the shivers at bay. In no time, the magic happened again. Eyes to the skies, he was tracking more phantoms from the north. They too, sought shelter from the storm. Blowing overhead at mach speeds, turning hard into the gale, they made their final decent. Behind the wall of cattails death was waiting. The big gun mounted and two more migrants were left floating.

My limit stowed, I pulled the stool. Sliding back into the river from our sheltered bay, the wall of wind hit us head on. Fighting the blow, the waves broke over the bow. My eyes teared and Pilots ears flapped.

With each dip and pull of the paddle we were losing ground. We were face to face with the winds from hell. Facing the reality of the herculean task at hand, a panic creeped in. Realizing the dire situation I remembered the sand bar that ran alongside the channel. Stepping out, I began dragging the skiff forward with Pilot wading beside me in the shallows.

Slowly, we made our way, one foot in front of the other, sloshing upstream. My heart pounded. Sweat poured down my face. Resting on the stern, steam rose from under my parka, my mind raced. Should we shoot back down river and wait it out? Shall we leave the skiff and walk out? Dam the wind.

Steadily, we pressed on. After what seemed like eternity, in the distance, I made out the oak lined dike. One final push and we could claim all the glory. As if on cue, there was a lull. The horizontal flakes began dropping vertically.

Pilot leaped in and we made a break for it. Paddling on my knees for leverage we began to make progress. Crossing the channel, shoulders screaming, we reached the dry canal.

Coming ashore, the mighty oaks towered overhead, I gazed high in the sky and gave my thanks for both the life and death that had come with the winds of change.

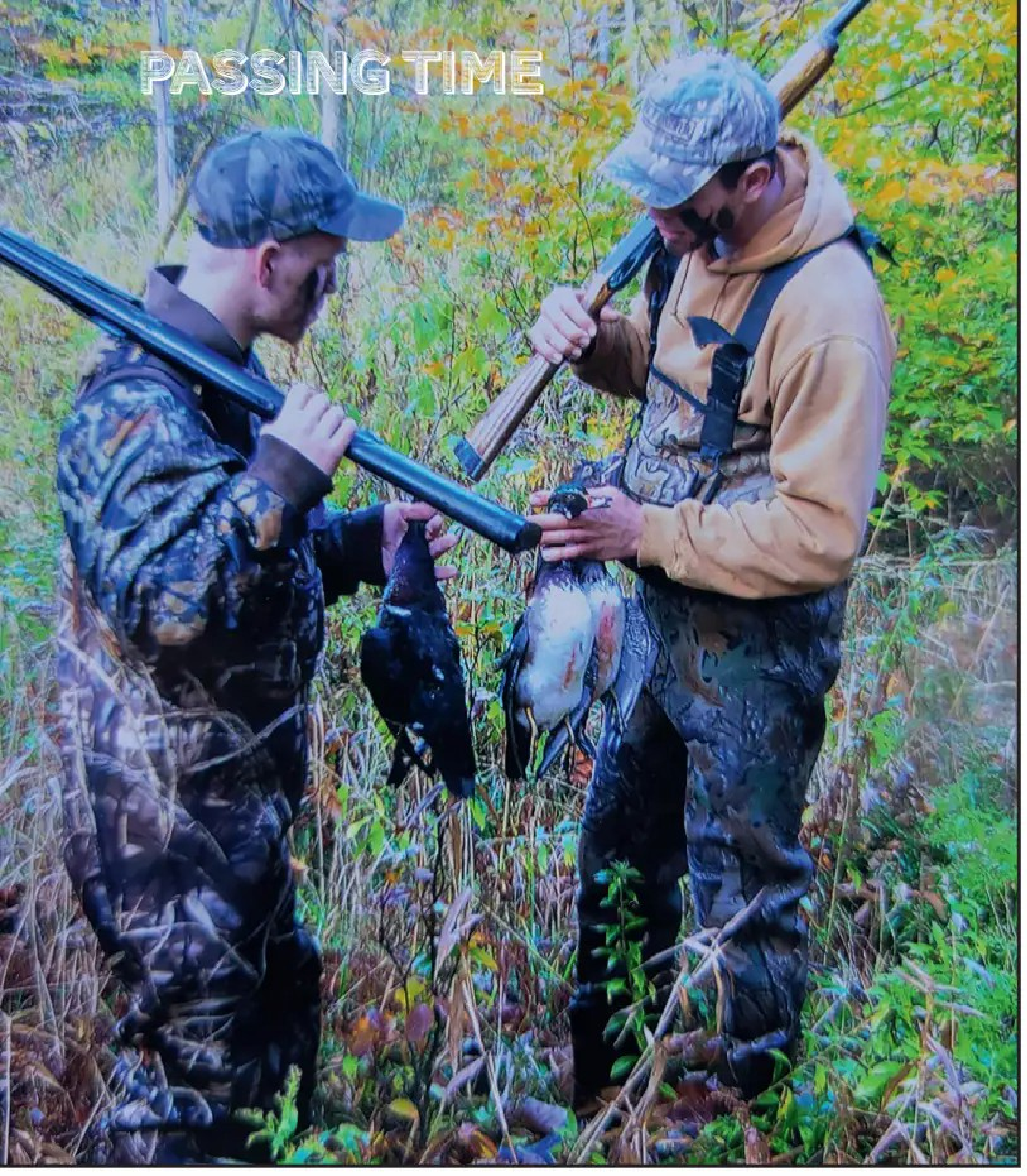
Photo John DePalma

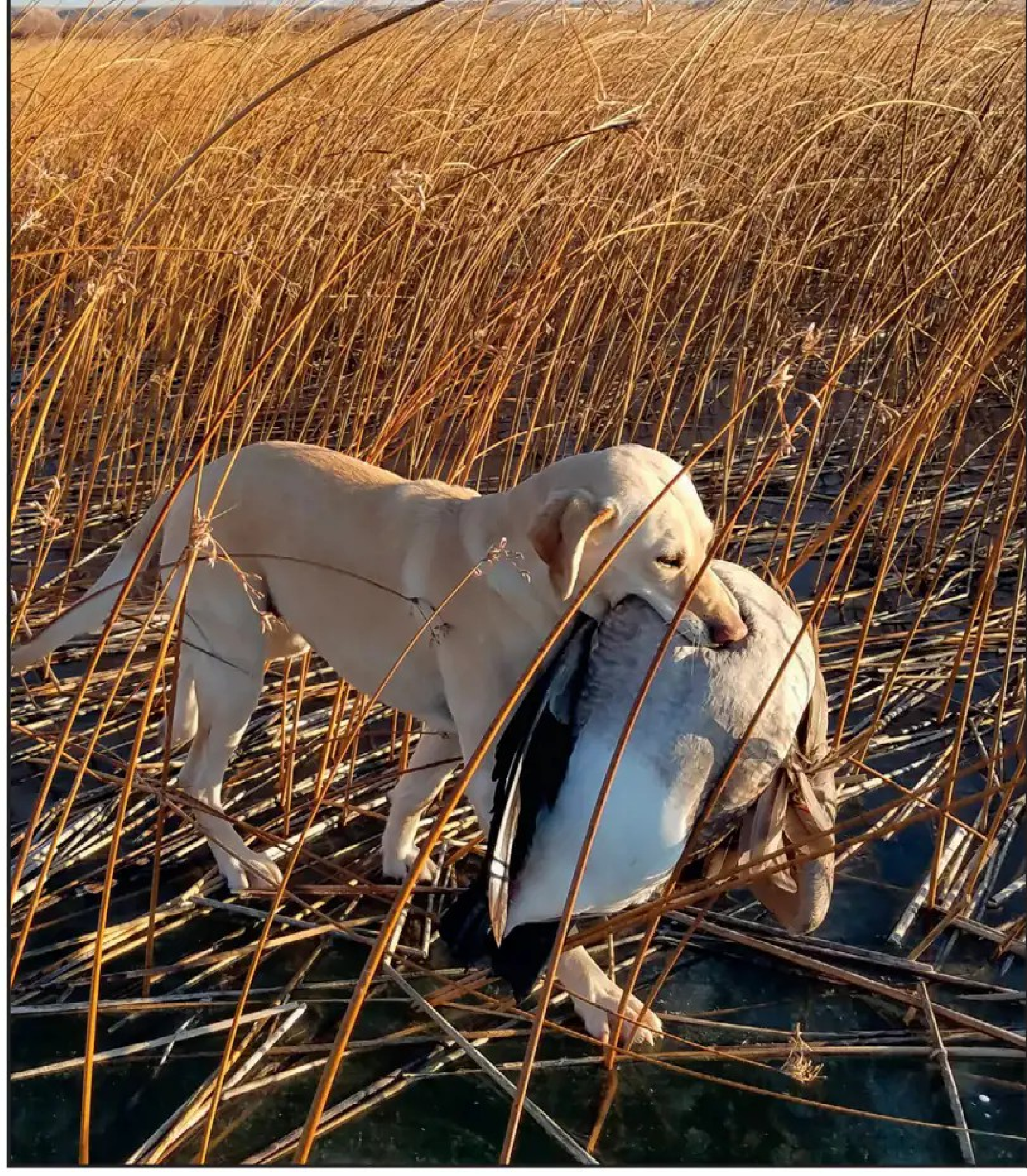
PASSING TIME

Pass Shooting Means Going Where Circumstance Leads

The cold of the ice I stood on started to seep through the bottom of my boots and the chill of the wind was doing the same down the back of my neck. I had been waiting on the ice, hidden in the farthest stretch of tulles from the bank, for nearly an hour, waiting for geese to start flying. I decided a brisk walk would warm me up, so I walked back to land. I was a few hundred yards down the frozen bank when the first group of geese flew low over my previous location. The flight had started! I called for Daisy, my yellow lab who was hunting her way through the tulles, and we hustled back toward the flight path.

By Chad Incorvia





The shallow, partially frozen lake that I had been standing on, freezes from the banks inward, leaving open water in the middle. This usually happens around the middle of December, and it happens fast, shutting down my typical marsh-boat style of hunting. For the birds however, it provides a perfect roosting and loafing area. The thin ice making the center of the lake inaccessible to any human.

My intent for the morning was to wait for the hungry birds to leave the partially frozen lake and intercept them on their way to the surrounding corn fields. A true pass shoot.

An Early Start

Pass shooting waterfowl isn't my preferred method of hunting, but I'm no stranger to the game either. My first experience with pass shooting also happened to be my first experience with waterfowl hunting. I remember that first hunt well.

Loaded with my New England Firearms single shot 12-guage, a box of steel shot, and my oversized waders, I followed my uncle through the mucky southern shore of Sugar Lake. Calling it a shore was a stretch as the southern end of Sugar Lake gradually transitioned from open water to swamp and eventually into a braided, meandering stream channel that flowed through hardwoods and farm fields. Located in western PA, this lake was a wood duck magnet.

To the north was the Erie National Wildlife refuge, a series of natural wetlands, swamps, beaver ponds, and man-made impoundments that were ideal habitat for squealing wood ducks. The refuge seeped into Sugar Lake, a kettle lake, formed during the last ice age, which then narrowed into Lake Creek which flowed for roughly 8 miles before joining Sugar Creek and continuing downstream, destined for the Ohio River and eventually the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico.

Not so ironically, the wood ducks that summered near Sugar Lake would follow the same path that its waters took on their way to the Gulf and their wintering grounds.

In the inky blackness of that early October morning, we waded half-way across the swampy shore of the lake before finding the perfect patch of brush that would hide our presence from passing ducks. Anticipation grew as the first shades of light started to soak through the low hanging clouds.

Shots echoed from the north end of the lake signaling that ducks were flying and marking the beginning of my first duck opener. I peered through the dim light and saw the barrel flashes followed shortly by the echoing boom of shotguns. Then they appeared, little dark silhouettes that streaked by. I thought that there was no way I would ever be able to shoot one. Hens squealed in an attempt to keep their small groups together which gave us a warning that more birds were on their way.

"Here they come" my uncle hissed as another small group of ducks closed in fast. We both fired and much to my surprise two ducks splashed behind us.

"We will pick them up later, reload your gun!" he exclaimed

Birds continued to buzz past us, appearing out of the gray light and disappearing back into it almost as quickly. We shot at singles, doubles, and small groups that morning, missing most, but able to connect with enough. As what's typical with wood duck flights, the action was mostly over within the first 20 minutes of shooting time.

We managed to shoot our limit of two birds each that morning, but much more was accomplished in my young mind. That hunt and the many other early morning fast and furious pass shoots on Sugar Lake were the beginning of my long obsession with waterfowling.

Getting It Right

Back to the half-frozen lake and current day, Daisy and I ran back to our original patch of tulles and crouched down just as the next group of birds lifted off the water and headed our way. They were high but still seemed in range. As the lead goose passed over, I swung through and touched the trigger only to see the bird tuck his neck back against his body.

"Too much lead" I thought.

I adjusted the amount of sky between his beak and my barrel and touched off the next two rounds. The bird's thick late season feathers absorbed both loads of steel BBs and he continued on with the rest of the flock unscathed. Not far behind however was another group

of birds, and they were flying dangerously low. Again, I touched off the trigger just as I swung through the lead bird. This time it crumpled and crashed through the tules and smacked the ice 10 yards behind me. Daisy was quick to the retrieve.

Though this was the most recent goose to fly too low over my waiting barrel, it wasn't the first. My first goose, in fact, fell on a pass shoot during my third season of waterfowl hunting.

Getting Initiated

I was perched on the railroad tracks that bisected a parcel of game lands adjacent to Geneva Marsh. That section of marsh was known for the late season geese that used it as a roost. "Murders Row" referred to the set of active train tracks that cut through the marsh. The tracks created a high point from which hunters waited for geese to come and go from the adjacent impoundments. Most of the birds flew much too high, but occasionally a goose would fly a little too low and be brought down by a lucky gunner, but trust me this was the exception, not the rule.

My Dad was accompanying me on this trip, and as usual, he was back in the woods a ways sitting around a fire trying to keep warm as I sat on the tracks waiting for birds. It was late in the morning, after the geese had left for the fields, when I heard the honks.

Distant at first, but drawing nearer. I honked on my call and was surprised to see the pair of birds turn and pick a flight path directly over me. My heart pounded in my chest as I clung to my Winchester 1200 pump gun. At the last instant I sprung up from behind the tracks and fired. Remarkably my first shot connected, and the lead goose tumbled through the trees. Due to my excitement, the next two shots only poked holes in the sky.

"He fell right beside me!" my Dad shouted from the woods.

The goose had landed only a few yards from him and was anything but dead, and we spent the next 5 minutes arguing about how to finish him off. I suggested using my knife, but that was too violent for my city-slicker father, so we settled on suffocation. Not the most humane in my eyes, but it worked, and I was officially a goose hunter.

Back again to the present goose hunt. Within moments of Daisy returning with the first bird, more geese were on their way. My shooting was warming up by this point and I dropped two birds out of the next flock with as many shots. Daisy was still working on the retrieves when another pair of birds winged over. I pulled through the larger of the two and touched off a shot. The bird folded and crashed onto the ice behind me and just like that I had my four-bird limit.

Though it's not my first choice for waterfowl hunting, pass shooting takes me back to a simpler time in my life. It reminds me that the boats, the gear, and the crazy early mornings can be fun and make for some good hunts, but they aren't always a necessity. I'll take a good pass shoot any time, and now instead of my uncle or father taking me I'm accompanied by my dog, and she doesn't care how I finish off wounded geese!

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Waning

Days

What Lures Us To Rise Early And Meet The Cold

By Cole Sousa

The wind battering the walls of the house woke me, and I lay in bed, staring through the window and watching the remnants of the storm cram snowflakes through the window screen. My clock read 4:30, my alarm had been set for 5 a.m. It was mid-December, the last day of Michigan's two-day detached duck season. An arctic cold had seaped out of the Northwest into the state, freezing much of the still water.

Rising from the snug blankets, I fumbled in the dark for my warmest hunting garments. Libby, my black Lab, got up and tried to follow me out of the room, but I shut the door in front of her.

"Single digits are just too cold for you," I told her through the wooden door.

She responded with a pitiful whine, but her contempt did not dissuade me, and a sigh followed the unmistakable creak of the bedframe as she went back to sleep.

A set of headlights illuminated sheets of snowflakes as I struggled to fasten the last buckle on my wader straps. Dad was arriving. We had planned to hunt together the previous day, but instead made a last-minute decision to try our luck on a forgotten backwater corner today, hoping that a few ducks would return from the nearby cornfields.

I shuffled down the steps to the garage to open the door. Frigid air poured in behind dad as he stamped off the snow from his boots.

"Hope you've got your gloves," he said. I patted the lump in my coat pocket in answer.

We loaded our respective gear into the truck and motored off. Snowfall had covered the roads with a slippery layer, restricting the speed to a safe 40 mph.

As we neared a sleeping town, an occasional truck and duck boat covered in reeds and grass flashed past us, headed in the opposite direction.

"I hope no one is trying to hunt our corner," I said.

"It might be frozen over," replied Dad. "That water isn't fast enough to keep it open when it gets this cold." I knew he was right. Many patches of water that typically stay open throughout the winter were iced over. We looked at them nervously while driving past.

"It won't be," I retorted, trying to retain optimism despite the bleak signs around us.

The tires crunched through a frozen snowbank as the truck turned down a two-track crowded by overgrown autumn olive. Limbs scratched against metal, and we bumped down the trail, holding our breath and peering over the tall sandy hill in search of opposing headlamps. No other set of tracks led down the tunnel of clawing branches, which brightened our spirits.

The truck skidded to a halt in a cramped turnaround, and we watched snow fall through the headlights for a handful of minutes before either of us spoke. The white, crystalline flakes pecked at the glass and made small piles above the windshield wipers. Both of us were reluctant to leave the comfort and warmth of the cab and step into a world of unforgiving cold.

"Let's go check it out before we carry the gear down that hill," Dad suggested, breaking the silence.

I nodded in agreement and opened the truck door, shattering the seal that divided pleasant warmth and the chilled winds of December.

The walk to the hill that sloped down toward the river seemed longer in the dark. A funny thing I thought—no matter where you go or how many times you have been there, the walk always seems to be much farther in the dark, especially when fresh snowfall has covered up familiar landmarks.

At the crest of the hill, overlooking a shallow, slow bend in the river, we stopped. I nervously turned my headlamp to its brightest setting to assess the situation.

Ice. Solid ice covered in a blanket of fresh snow. We stood there and stared down at it, listening to the wind shake the pine trees while we weighed our options for the morning. I know that I was not the only one thinking of a warm bed back home.

"Well, that's not good," said Dad, stating the obvious, chuckling to himself.

"I'm going down there to see how thick the ice is," I said, and half slid, half fell down the side of the hill to the water's edge. It was immediately obvious that the ice was too thin to bear our weight but just thick enough to make busting it up a nightmare.

"Maybe we can try the main river channel!" I shouted up into the darkness. The sound of my voice seemed to be swallowed up by the snow. While I was struggling back up the slippery hill, several flocks of geese flew past, honking in the pitch black. They were following the river southwards, toward the lake, undoubtedly scared into flight by hunters farther upstream.

Maybe those hunters had found open water and would have more shooting? No matter. It was a hunt with Dad, just as we had hunted together when I was much younger, when times were much simpler. Ducks would merely be a bonus. Right now they were an excuse to spend a few hours together before our favorite time of year came to a close.

In one trip, we hauled as much gear as possible down the hill, managing the precarious footing. We crossed the frozen corner, busting through ice in order to reach a small grassy island that divided the surging river from the ice-glazed cove.

The coagulated waters oozed past deliberately, and chunks of ice floated by in the current, where they could be heard grating against the concrete pilings of a small bridge some distance downstream.

I was reminded of the dog back at home, and how glad I was to have left her behind. Retrieving in the river with those ice floes would be dangerous. Too risky for my liking. I would have to play my part as a retriever again. Besides, the exercise might warm me up.

We reached the west end of the divide, where the two streams of water went their separate ways. A small patch of slack water remained open beyond a large shelf of ice, thrust ashore by the current. While examining the ice, I noticed a handful of footprints in the snow. Closer inspection revealed that they were made by a duck.

"The ice is thinner here," Dad pointed out. "We can break it into big pieces and shove them downstream with the current. It will give us a place to set a few more decoys in calmer water."

"Good idea," was my reply.

After half an hour or so had passed, we had a hole large enough to set a handful of decoys in. From years of hunting the late season, we had learned that it was not necessary to spread large quantities of decoys as we typically would early in the year. Most late-season birds have seen large spreads and accompanying spinners and splashers and know enough to stay well away.

I placed our half dozen mallards carefully, trying to keep water from freezing on their backs and causing them to glisten unnaturally. Dad busied himself in a patch of dead reeds on the shore, weaving a makeshift blind before the hour of fluttering wings and burnt powder. Their frosted tips made dry, scratchy noises in the dark that

clashed with the background sound of ice hitting the bridge.

The eastern sky was beginning to brighten as fingers of warm light poked out behind the towering white pines across the river, bathing the undersides of the ragged clouds with vibrant oranges and reds.

Dad fumbled in his pocket for a cigar. The lighter took several strikes, but it finally lit, illuminating his face for a brief instant. The glow showed once dark hair, now crowded out by silver grey. We talked to pass the time until shooting light. He was about to ask me how it was, living away from home, when the crisp air delivered the soft whistling sound of duck wings.

Ten mallards fought against the wind overhead, their sharp eyes studying the motionless decoys below them. They hovered just over the backs of the blocks, fluttering their wings and murmuring to each other in their ancient duck language. I stood and fired, picking out a big drake that had caught my eye. The lone bird fell at a hard slant and landed mid-river. Dad fired too, or tried to.

As I returned from retrieving my downed bird, a shameful voice somewhere in the reeds muttered, “I forgot to load my gun.”

I just laughed. “Remember when you first took me hunting? There were wood ducks everywhere and I had to remind you to put shells in your gun.”

“Yes, I do.” He replied. “You don’t let me forget it.”

The morning drew on, we smoked and talked about work, marriage, life, furthering the bond between father and son in a way that only a cold, slow day in a duck blind can. At times, we said nothing, simply preferring to stare into the roiling sky, enjoying the last morning of a season that was fizzling down to the bitter end.

Writer Norman Maclean once wrote, “On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.”

Some of those words must be behind the clouds on those heavy grey days, when the sun cowers, and the freezing winds carry the ducks south. Maybe those words are what guide them in the journey to softer weather. Maybe they are

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what lures man and boy out of bed at 5 a.m. to occupy a spit of land in sub-zero temperatures.

A flock of black ducks peeled around the corner and skimmed over the blocks and out of sight. Fortunately for us, a handful of others followed after them, trying to settle in with the decoys. I watched Dad pick out a bird and fire, as I had so many times before. No. 4s cut through feathers, and his barrels followed the single down to the ice. One of the ducks flared in our direction, and my second shot connected with another drake as he tried to slip away, crashing to the frozen surface with a satisfying thump.

We waited for the feathers to settle, then went to pick up our ducks. I found mine quickly in the fresh layer of snowfall, dead as a doornail. Behind me, Dad had collected his own bird, a beautiful black duck, and he hoisted it to eye level to examine the feathers against the muddled orange of a winter sunrise. His breath rose in clouds and joined with the steam from the river.

As I watched, I wondered if my own children would enjoy waterfowling as much as he and I. Certainly, it must run in our blood. Some gene that makes men and boys love the view of an early morning sun, the sting of a stiff north wind, and the sound of whispering wings slicing the frosted air.

He turned to me and grinned widely; we both knew that it was unlikely that there would be any more shooting that morning, but we were grateful for our time together, and the ducks, of course.

After a few hours had passed with no more than a handful of passing geese in the sky, we decided to call it quits. By now, my gloves had frozen into a solid brick of ice and fabric, and Dad's cigar was just about gone. With the decoys sacked, we took a moment to watch for ducks, as it is their habit (or even magical ability) to sense when guns are cased. Sure enough, a pair of mallards set their wings, then veered off, the hen quacking in alarm.

"Thanks for taking me hunting this morning," Dad said, with eyes still on the distant mallards.

"Thanks for coming with me," was my reply. Then we turned and walked up the hill, leaving behind the final hunt of the season.

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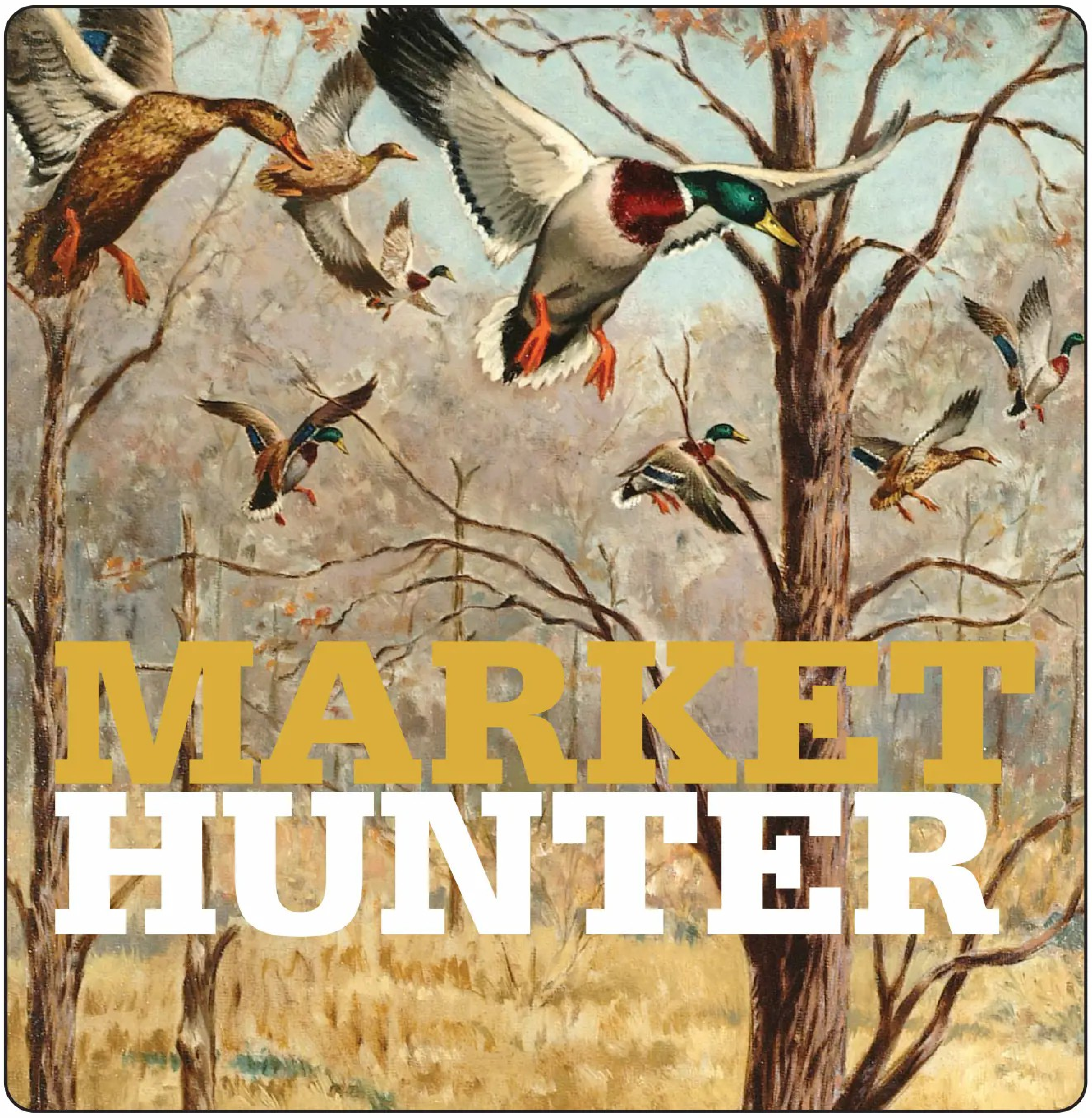
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POTSHOTS

Who's Crazier?

By T.R. Hendrick

You've probably heard about this debate that has gone viral nationwide recently. "Who is crazier, early season ice anglers or late-season waterfowlers?" My vote is for my late-season waterfowling brethren, and I can prove it. Don't get me wrong, those anglers that venture out on the first thin ice of the season are as crazy as a young retriever on opening morning. But waterfowlers…duck hunters in particular…are way stupider, er, crazier, when it comes to things that we will do just to kill a duck or two in harsh late season conditions. Here is my addition to the crazy train.

"Geezer alert! Whitehead, stepping to the podium." It all went down on a bitter January morning in upstate New York as I and two buddies launched our 14-foot duck boat on a snow-covered stone beach on Lake Ontario. We were determined to kill late-season goldeneye that hung out on the big lake.

There was a strong south wind blowing straight offshore, making the nearshore of the Great Lake as smooth as the skin on a baby's keister as we motored down the shoreline to a point we'd often hunted when the lake was calm. The morning's hunt went well as the south wind continued to pick up. We pulled the plug around noon with a pile of whistlers in the bag and motored back to our launch point on the rocky beach.

We jumped out as we hit shore and pulled the boat up on the stones and went to get the truck and trailer parked a short five-minute walk away. When we returned, our jaws dropped. The strong south wind had blown our boat, loaded with all our guns, gear and decoys, off the shore. It was now drifting fifty yards out in the huge lake and quickly heading for Canada some fifty miles across.

We had broken our golden rule of always throwing the anchor up on shore when we get out of a boat. This was a religious practice driven into our heads for this exact reason by the old-time, big water hunters who had come before.

Needless to say, we panicked. I still wore waders, so I ran into the lake, getting within 30 yards of the boat before it got too deep and ice water started to come over the top of my chest-high boots. I debated swimming the remaining distance for just a few seconds. Luckily, my soft brain reminded me that the water temperature was about 40 degrees, and that I was wearing waders. I doubted I could make it. Even if I did make the swim to the boat, how was I going to pull myself up into the boat with waders full of water?

Visibly rattled, we ran farther up the shore to a marina that was closed for the winter. Spotting a tiny eight-foot dinghy under one of the large sailboats we grabbed the little craft and the two paddles stowed under it and ran it down to the shoreline. I got in the dinghy with one of my buddies and started paddling without taking a second to think of the consequences. We hadn't taken off our waders and our lifejackets were in the duck boat! Talk about morons.

Back then I weighed in at about a buck and a half, counting my waders. But my buddy was a big boy, twice my size. I could barely reach the water with my paddle while his side of the dinghy had only an inch of freeboard. You might call it uneven weight distribution—in a tiny vessel! As we got about fifty yards out, the now gale-force wind caught us and was soon pushing us seaward at an alarming speed. That's when it dawned on me that if we didn't catch up with our boat, which was now drifting farther out and even faster, we weren't going to be able to paddle back against that strong wind.

Mind you, all of this took place back before cellphones. On Lake Ontario in January there were no boats out, and thus none to rescue us. The closest coast guard station was over fifty miles away. I yelled to my buddy that we'd better catch that boat or we were not going to make it back.

Our adrenaline kicked in and we paddled that little dingy like it our lives depended on it…because it did. We finally caught up with our boat a good 500 yards off shore. We were totally exhausted. Somehow, I was able to climb into the craft, start the motor and tow the dingy back to shore with the grim reaper's breath still warm on the backs of our necks.

Now, let me add for legal purposes that not all waterfowlers are as intellectually challenged as we were that day, but this example should help settle the debate. We late-season waterfowlers are stup… Whoops. I mean crazier.

In your face ice fisherman! We win! We win! We win?

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